

Washington, D.C. - The National Endowment for the Arts on Tuesday honored Salinas resident Violet de Cristoforo with a National Heritage Fellowship Award, the highest honor in the United States for folk and traditional arts. Congressman Sam Farr (D-Carmel) presented de Cristoforo with the award and spoke in tribute of her work.

"Salinas is known as the hometown of John Steinbeck, who wrote powerful novels about the lives of distressed people. Now, Salinas will know the name of another great artist, Violet de Cristoforo, for her poetry on the same subject," said Rep. Farr.

De Cristoforo, born Kazue Yamane in Ninole, Hawaii, was sent to Japan for her primary education. She later returned to the United States to attend high school in Fresno. Upon graduation, de Cristoforo married Shigaru Matsuda and joined a poetry club where she became known for her kaiko poetry, a freestyle form of haiku.

When World War II began, de Cristoforo, her husband and three children were moved to a forced detention facility in Jerome, Ark., where the family was split up. De Cristoforo and her children were sent to Tule Lake, Calif., while her husband was sent to Santa Fe, N.M. While living in the camp, she wrote hundreds of haikus about her life in the camps. Sadly, only 15 of the hundreds of poems survived her time in the camps.

In 1987, de Cristoforo published a book, "Poetic Reflections of the Tule Lake Internment Camp, 1944." In 1997, de Cristoforo compiled the haikus of many former internment camp poets and published "May Sky: There is Always Tomorrow: An Anthology of Japanese American Concentration Camp Kaiko Haiku."

"Violet reminds me of a famous quote, that all children are born artists and that it's our job to help keep them artists as they grow older," said Rep. Farr. "Violet has done just that for many years, and we honor her today for her amazing journey and wonderful poetry."

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